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ABSTRACT

This guide offers suggestions for developing learning materials for self-instruction by adults. It is based on methods used in the Bristol (England) Open Learning Centre. The guide covers the following topics: (1) using open (self-instructional) materials with basic education students; (2) supplying support for instructional materials; (3) creating and using study guides. (4) helping students unable to read a study guide by creating tapes; (5) making materials accessible; (6) using computers for self-instruction; (7) using word processing to teach literacy skills; and (8) using concept keyboards. A four-step process for writing a study guide is included in the guide. (KC)

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ALBSU
Adult Literacy & Basic Skills Unit

MAKING AND ADAPTING OPEN LEARNING MATERIALS

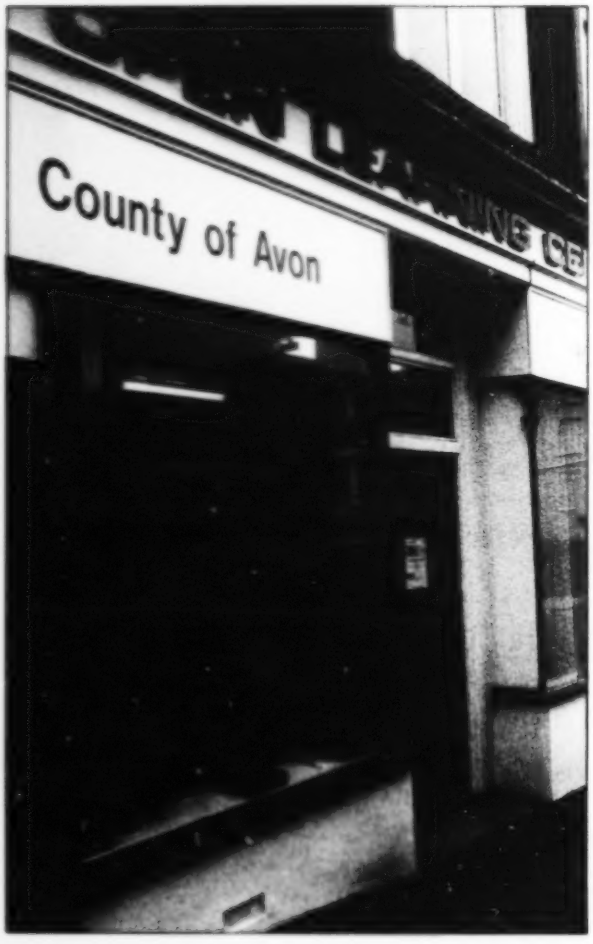

photo Carrie Hitchcock

Do open learning materials suit everyone? What issues come up in preparing materials, and organising them for easy access? What kinds of support should be on offer? In this article Glenys Smith, Development Worker with responsibility for computer assisted language learning at Bristol Open Learning Centre, offers practical suggestions on developing open learning materials. Bristol Open Learning Centre is a Unit of Central Bristol Adult Education Centre, Avon LEA, and is supported by ALBSU.

Can I use open learning materials with basic students?

We've all heard the cry, "You'll never be able to use Open Learning methods and materials with BASIC students!" But those of us who are working in Basic Skills Open Learning centres, are beginning to discover that it's not so much the level of the student that's crucial. It's more a question of things like motivation, confidence and habit.

Also, it's not that there are some students who *can* cope in an open learning situation and others who *never* will. It's more that individuals fall somewhere along a continuum. This ranges between needing the support of a group with a teacher organised at regular fixed times, and those who are ready to take control over what, when, and how they learn.

A key factor facilitating the student's progress along this continuum is the amount of support you are able to embed into your materials. Learning to use this form of support will help students to wean themselves away from tutor dependence.

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How can I make sure my material contains the right support?

To answer this you need to think about what you actually offer the student in a tutor led group and how you can provide similar support in your open learning materials.

One way of doing this is to supplement your materials with a *Study Guide*. In open learning, the study guide has to replace the interactive role of the tutor.

In the table below, the left hand column represents the stages at which tutor support is given in the traditional group situation. The right hand column shows the equivalent components of a study guide.

This sort of framework can be used to supplement existing worksheets, or it may be the structure you use to produce new materials.

The study guide might be in the form of additional sheets of paper, or taped material, or a combination of both.

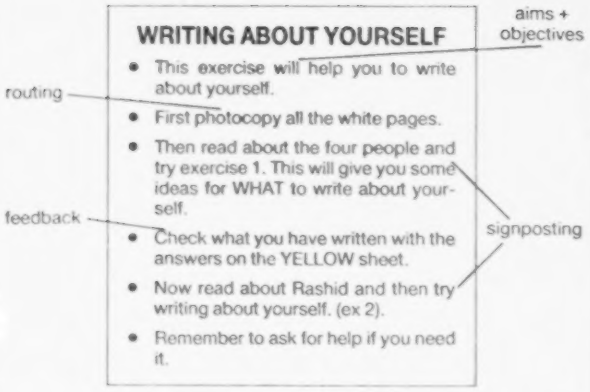
Conventional Class	Study Guide
Tutor: "The next part of the course looks at the way to lay out business letters."	Aims and Objectives
"Could you have a look at these two examples of letters and suggest ways they could be improved?"	Sign Posting
"Ignore the writing in the box at the top of the page."	Routing
"Right, let's discuss the different bits of the letter and how they might be changed."	Teaching Points
"Here's another letter that's been cut up. You have to lay it out in the correct way."	Instructions/ Practice
"Here's what it should look like."	Feedback
"Let's go over the main points again."	Summary
"Now you try writing a letter to . . . to confirm the date of a meeting."	Assignment

What does this mean in practice?

There are many valuable worksheets around which would be ideal for supplementing with a study guide. Fortunately, there are increasing numbers whose use isn't restricted by copyright regulations. Most ALBSU and many NEC publications fall into this category.

The above chart may suggest that writing a study guide is a daunting task, we all know the pressures of trying to produce self access materials in these early days of Open Learning! An example taken from "Help Yourself to English" (NEC), shows how *simply* this can be done.(see insert)

Further adaptation of the material involved enlarging an exercise sheet so it was big enough for the student to work on and copying the answers onto different coloured paper to make them easily identifiable.


WRITING ABOUT YOURSELF
aims + objectives
routing
feedback
signposting
• This exercise will help you to write about yourself.
• First photocopy all the white pages.
• Then read about the four people and try exercise 1. This will give you some ideas for WHAT to write about yourself.
• Check what you have written with the answers on the YELLOW sheet.
• Now read about Rashid and then try writing about yourself. (ex 2).
• Remember to ask for help if you need it.

Teaching points, instructions and assignments are included in the material itself

It may be that you are starting from a worksheet that is literally a practice exercise and nothing more. For example, you may want your student to be able to make sense of and label a diagram, perhaps part of an engine. All you have is the diagram. In this case you have rather more work to do and it may be useful to work through a series of stages as outlined below:

Writing a Study Guide

Stage 1: **Initial Planning**

- What are your learning objectives for the student?
- Is your pack going to contain all the resources? or will it be loose sheets which direct the student to various existing resources?
- How many hours work will it cover?
- Which media would you like to include?

Stage 2: **The Core Resources**

- Identify the resources you want to use.
- Do they cover your objectives?
- Is the level right?
- Is the material too culturally specific?
- Does it portray stereotyped images?
- Is the presentation attractive?
- What will you use and what will you leave out?
- Is the material chunkable?

Stage 3: **The Study Guide**

- Look through your core resources and identify what's missing. (see the table above for elements to include)

Stage 4: **Drafting**

- Draft out the study guide and alter the core resources where necessary.
- Get a friend to evaluate it.
- Try it out.

What about the more basic students who can't read a study guide?

The obvious answer for these students is to put the elements you need for your study guide onto tape. With one such student who was interested in astronomy, I used the tape to explain the stages of a language experience exercise we had decided to do.

John had talked to me about his telescope and what he could see through it, and I had written it all down. I then word processed it using a program which produces large print, and photocopied it onto first white and then blue card. The white card was cut up into sentence strips and the blue card provided the answer sheet.

On the tape I introduced the exercise explaining what I hoped John would get out of it and then taking him through the various stages. I was careful to tell him where to turn off the tape in order to do a particular bit of the exercise.

Having made sure he knew how to use the tape recorder the week before, the materials were waiting for John when he next came in and he was able to work on them independently for a good 45 minutes before needing my help.

I think it is important to say at this point that open learning for basic, or any other level students for that matter, is NOT unsupported learning. Accessibility to a tutor, especially in the early stages, is essential. Even after a student has become more confident with this mode of learning, regular meetings with a personal tutor for ongoing evaluation and review of progress provide invaluable support.

The mistake I made with John's exercise was to record a personal tape for a specific student. In future all my tapes will be generalisable to *all* students at a particular level!

The potential for using tapes is enormous, because it can contain the equivalent of a study guide, but also listening materials. One colleague produced a multi-purpose pack, combining text, music and study guide material on Elvis Presley. The language skills practised include listening, reading with understanding, dictionary skills, capital letters, punctuation and free writing. The pack has been reproduced several times and filed under relevant headings in our self access system, (outlined below).

Once you have tried making this type of material, you realise its potential in terms of the variety of contexts in which it can be used. For instance, instructions which have to be understood at work in written and verbal form are ideal for this.

Another colleague, preparing material for a pre recruitment course, taped a supervisor in the workplace giving sewing instructions. A study guide, on paper and tape, was prepared for students to use in groups of two and three. It took them through an exercise involving listening to instructions whilst following the various stages through diagrams. They were then given the opportunity to discuss these before going on to listen again with one student actually carrying out the instructions whilst another observed.

It's not difficult to produce reasonable quality tapes and the rewards in terms of greater student autonomy make it well worth the effort.

Tips for Taping

- Use a room with soft furnishing, books curtains etc. This acts as "padding" and stops your voice sounding hollow.
- Put your tape recorder on top of something that will absorb sound, like a cushion or even a couple of files.
- Use an external, unidirectional microphone where possible.
- Record with the volume turned right down - this helps to cut out any hum from the recorder itself.
- Do a test run to make sure the level and quality of sound produced is OK.
- Try and do the recording all in one go. This ensures the volume stays constant and prevents interruptions from on-off clicks.
- Practise taping without using a prepared script, it sounds so much more natural.

How can I make sure my materials are accessible?

This is a question of how you're going to store your material, and what system of retrieval you'll use. To some extent this is dependent on existing factors like premises and resources you may well be stuck with. Some simple guidelines include:

- The materials should be as visible as possible
- Any key used should be simple and well displayed
- It's better to duplicate materials in a number of places than use a complicated system of cross referencing.

In Bristol we use a colour coding system to identify the areas covered at the centre. These are then broken down into the sorts of tasks students might want to be able to do. Cards, showing the colour coding, areas and tasks are displayed at the ends of trolleys containing the materials in hanging files.

photo: Carne Hitchcock

We explain the system to students when they start attending the centre, but of course, with all the other new information there is to take in, this has to be continuously reinforced.

We do this by giving explicit instructions about where to find the materials for the next stage of a work programme. These are incorporated into guidelines prepared for students as they move onto a new piece of work, and waiting for them in their files when they arrive. It takes some time for students to become familiar with the system, but this is all part of learning to learn independently. They soon transfer these skills to finding their own extension exercises as an initial piece of work is completed.

How do computers fit into all this?

The simple answer is – very easily.

As with paper based resources, it's a matter of either taking existing material and designing a study guide, or developing new resources which include a study guide.

Data free programs: wordprocessors, databases and spreadsheets, are probably the most flexible tools, providing a quick

introduction to the potential of computers for Open Learning.

For instance, as part of a pre recruitment course aimed at people who would be working with medical records, we wanted to include material which would help to develop skills using a command driven database. We use Quest at the centre, so I set up a database containing the sort of information found in medical records used for making and changing appointments.

I then identified the sorts of operations students would need to be able to handle, and devised a study guide in the form of a booklet which incorporated these. In order to maximise the use of this work in the centre, I tried to make sure that the instructions were worded in a general way and not specific to these particular students.

Ideally, such work needs to be piloted and revised where necessary before use with students. This isn't always possible, but as long as your support materials are on a wordprocessor, changes can be made quickly and easily.

What about wordprocessing?

Simple programs like Caxton for Nimbus and Folio for the BBC are increasingly being used in ABE and ESOL for developing and practising literacy skills. Tutors are beginning to extend ideas introduced in the ALBSU Wordwise Pack and Janet Leonard's book on Wordprocessing for Literacy[1] by producing their own exercises tailored to particular needs. It doesn't take a lot of imagination to be in exploring the potential for adding study guide material to such exercises on the students' discs.

For some students, this is a lot easier than having to keep looking down and refinding their place on written materials. They quickly get used to scrolling up and down a couple of pages to remind themselves of instructions or check answers.

> Today you will learn the words you need for the exercise on Electricians. Here are the words:
>
> | | |
> |---|---|
> | electricity | flex |
> | fuse | switch |
> | circuit | ceiling rose |
>
> Now press the arrow to move down and fill in the missing letters.

Many of our students find that once having used a simple word processor for literacy, they are keen to combine this aspect with learning more about wordprocessing itself.

Because we have a network of computers, we have been able to create access to a special menu. This offers students the use of all the wordprocessors we have available, and contains files of exercises which focus both on literacy and wordprocessing skills. In other words, exercises which are then saved as a special kind of file which can be used by a variety of programs. Students are then free to choose whether they want to work on a particular literacy skill, wordprocessing skill or a combination of both.

This cuts down the preparation work for the tutor and allows students to work on wordprocessing and literacy at a level appropriate to them.

Don't worry if you don't have a network because such files can also be stored on disc for use with a range of wordprocessing programs. Students who don't complete a particular exercise could then save what they *have* done on a separate disc.

Concept Keyboards?

Last, but certainly not least, I must mention concept keyboards. These are the boards which respond to touch with a letter, word, phrase or sentence on the screen. They can be used instead of or in conjunction with the traditional keyboard. An overlay, a sheet of paper or thin card, is what the student actually sees and presses to produce the words on screen. The overlay may have on it words, in English or other languages, pictures, or a combination of these.

A concept keyboard may be used for a range of purposes and levels. In Bristol we have developed materials for use with mono and multilingual students. For the latter, a multilingual colleague has produced phonic overlays to teach the sounds of English letters. The program is introduced on tape and the student is asked to look at a series of pictures in turn whilst listening to the name. When the picture is pressed, the name appears on the screen. The student is then invited to reproduce the word by pressing its constituent sounds, represented on the overlay by symbols in mother tongue.

photo: Carrie Hitchcock

Another pack uses tape and workbook to support students using the concept keyboard to develop skills in understanding written instructions. The idea is that students should use existing knowledge plus information from pictures/diagrams, to help them unravel and follow instructions. In this case the instructions are for wiring a plug.

There are many obvious applications of the idea in a work situation. Parts of machinery or other equipment can be labelled using a concept keyboard, and instructions for use depicted in stages through diagrams. The student listens to the instruction, presses the appropriate picture and sees the word appear on the screen.

There is insufficient space here to explain how these packs are actually produced. With programs such as Prompt/Writer or Folio for the BBC, or the new concept keyboard package for the Nimbus and a little time, it's quite possible for any tutor to develop her own customised resources which students can explore in an Open Learning situation.

Any concluding thoughts?

Yes: to reinforce that open learning is not unsupported learning. The role of the tutor in negotiating a work program and helping the student towards a more independent mode of learning is crucial. This process is ongoing and the need for support will vary, but is unlikely to disappear completely.

The new Open Learning Centres are "in the news" at the moment and some of you may be thinking that all this doesn't really have much to do with you. But which of us has never worked in a situation where students at different levels and with varying needs have required a swing towards more independent learning? I hope that the current focus on open learning will provoke a lot more thought about how existing and new materials might enable students to move towards greater autonomy and give tutors the opportunity to reflect on how best to use available resources.

1. *Word Processing for Literacy Skills*, by Lynette Oliphant, published by ALBSU.
Word Processing and Language Skills, by Janet Leonard, published by ALBSU.

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